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In Aid of Teaching James Joyce’s “Araby”

Jason Snart

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James Joyce’s famous short story, “Araby,” is familiar to many readers: a young boy, growing up in 1890s Dublin, promises to his first “love” that he will go to the bazaar, enchantingly called Araby, and return to her with a gift. “Araby” has held a special place in my heart over the many years that I have read, re-read, and “taught” the story in various composition and literature classes. I actually had to cover the story during the teaching demonstration portion of the interview process for my current position. But I qualify the word “taught” here because it often feels like the best I manage with a story like “Araby,” in the limited time it always seems we have to cover it, is to “introduce” it to students—I “present” Joyce’s work more than anything. Despite this, or maybe because of this, I return to “Araby” over and over again, almost as a kind of pedagogic challenge. It is ironic that Araby—the bazaar—casts an “Eastern enchantment” over the main character in the story itself, while “Araby”—the short story—has cast its own kind of enchantment over me. In an effort to make my teaching of the story something more than simply telling students what is happening, I’ve started using two very effective visual aids: the first is the front cover image from the 1894 “Araby in Dublin” catalogue (Figure 1). The second is Dennis J. Courtney and Joseph Bierman’s 1999 film adaptation of “Araby.”

The “Araby in Dublin” image and the film are each valuable individually, but in combination they work extremely well together, especially when time is of the essence. These complimentary visual aids have proven to be a great help in getting at one of the more elusive, though crucial, themes in the story: the degree to which the commercial, or the financial, has invaded every aspect of the young narrator’s life. He doesn’t realize this until the story’s conclusion (which is, in part, why he is so deflated at the end), though the reader is clearly meant to pick up on the commercial theme from the beginning; this dramatic tension between what we know or are supposed to know and what the main character
knows is a large part of what makes the story so intriguing. But of course if readers aren’t seeing the commercial theme in the story, and how it interacts with the spiritual/religious Catholic environment that the boy is a part of, then it is hard to gain full appreciation of the story, let alone to feel the import of the prototypically Joycean “epiphany” that closes the tale.

The “Araby in Dublin” Catalogue Cover Image

The “Araby in Dublin” catalogue was produced by the Browne and Nolan company for the actual Araby bazaar that occurred in Dublin in May of 1894. The image is pedagogically helpful on a number of levels. It can, for example, be used to prompt discussion of the “exoticism” of the bazaar itself: how is Araby presented? What does it represent for the young boy in the story? Broadly speaking, Araby is part of the quasi-fantasy world of spirituality, or religiosity, that the boy understands to be somehow removed from the squalid, commercial concerns of his everyday life. Araby, he says, is a “magical name” and it casts an “Eastern enchantment” over him (436; 434). It might be a dangerous place, but it is still part of the chivalric romance in which he is the hero, more fantasy than reality. Araby will provide the boy with the setting for his quest to bring something to the neighborhood girl with whom he’s infatuated: Mangan’s sister. That we never learn her name is, as many scholars have noted, representative of her status as icon/idol for the boy more than actual person. Below I will discuss how the film adaptation of “Araby” interpolates the “quest” aspect of the story, along with the Tarcisius myth that likely provides the boy with his confused self-image.

While the stereotyped exoticism suggested by the Araby catalogue image provides excellent ground for class discussion (a gun-toting “sheik” on his camel and the minaret-ed city in the background), I am more immediately interested in how the image reveals explicitly that the bazaar is not removed from everyday commercialism at all. Quite the opposite is, in fact, the case. To quote the text of the catalogue cover, the bazaar, the “grand oriental fete,” is being held “in aid of Jervis St. Hospital.”

When I teach “Araby,” the first activity the class undertakes is to consider the catalogue image; at some point, I will ask students what the rather jarring “in aid of” text is all about—it is certainly not very “oriental,” “grand,” or “fete”-like. Few students will know, exactly, but it doesn’t
take long to explain what the Jervis St. Hospital is (or was, since it closed in 1987). From here, most students will understand that the bazaar is a fund-raiser for a local hospital. So with the help of the Araby catalogue cover image, students can see quite explicitly from the start what the boy in the story will only discover at the end of the tale, when he realizes that Araby is just a marketplace, an “empty and sterile commercial confection” as one Joyce critic writes” (Norris 309). It is an event much like the one he attends on Saturday night, when he accompanies his aunt to the local street market: “On Saturday evenings when my aunt went marketing I had to go to carry some of the parcels” (433). At this street market, he is repulsed by the “bargaining women,” for example, never understanding that his quest to Araby is little more than a trip to the mall to bargain for a trinket and that his adoration is little more than a flirtation.

The Araby catalogue image thus provides an immediate and valuable cue that helps students to see the basic “problem” of the story: the boy in “Araby” understands, as best he can, his infatuation, his crush on a slightly older neighborhood girl, as a kind of spiritual adoration. Torchiana notes that the boy’s “confused adoration is couched [. . .] in the language of the liturgy” (62). And the boy clearly believes or has been convinced by his Catholic education that such adorations exist above the grubby world of commercial and financial concerns; thus he is able to maintain for himself a romanticized fantasy world in which spirituality (again, perhaps “religiosity” is a more appropriate term) and his participation in it are above the materialism of the everyday. Images of the boy ascending in the story during the height of his confused adoration provide a nice metaphor for his sense of being above the everyday: for example, “I mounted the staircase and gained the upper part of the house. The high cold empty gloomy rooms liberated me and I went from room to room singing. From the front window I saw my companions playing below in the street” (435). What crushes him at the Araby bazaar is the revelation that his fantasy world and the everyday world of money are deeply intertwined, if not in fact one and the same. The Araby catalogue image has told us this from the start.

Jervis Street Hospital

For classroom purposes we don’t need exhaustive details about the actual Jervis Street Hospital itself, informally known as “the Jervo” (Davis
xiv), though some details are particularly interesting. Those who are looking for a book-length history of the hospital will find Eoin O’Brien’s work, *The Charitable Infirmary 1718-1987: A Farewell Tribute*, extremely useful. For example, it had been known, soon after its founding in 1718, as “The Charitable Infirmary” (Gallagher 2; O’Brien 254) and its motto was “SOLI DEO GLORIA” (O’Brien 254). Further, it did not move to Jervis Street until the late 1700s.

Records for 1896 indicate that the hospital received very little in the way of government grants. It was, rather, “solely dependent on the voluntary subscriptions of the charitable citizens of Dublin, and on the generosity of the benevolent friends of the Institution” (qtd. in O’Brien 258). Joyce critics have noted the theme of charity as it runs through “Araby,” though often a confused charity, the charity that comes from an overbearing sense of obligation. One reporter, writing on Araby during the festivities in May of 1894, unintentionally points up the underlying irony of the charity at play: “somehow, when one thought for a moment of the plain brick building [Jervis Street hospital itself] hidden away in a narrow street in a mean quarter of the city, and of the suffering sick in its quiet and almost severely bare wards, contrasting it with the animation and the vivid colouring of the thronging multitudes [at Araby], the brilliant spectacle assumed yet another feature. All this wealth and art and stir we were reminded was in the cause of charity” (qtd. in Torchiana 58).

Joyce scholars also note that the author’s “larger method [...] can discover itself in the simplest of references and place-names” (Torchiana 4). That Joyce may have been thinking about these institutions specifically without actually naming them in “Araby” is enticingly suggested by the name of the pawnbroker’s widow in the story, “who collected used stamps for some pious purpose”: Mrs. Mercer. Mercer’s hospital was opened in 1734, located in central Dublin (O’Brien 254; Oppert 184). Mrs. Mercer’s name also gives us the suggestion of “mercantile,” and she lingers one night at the narrator’s home, waiting for the Uncle to return from work, perhaps to collect an unpaid debt or to press him for a donation for charity. “Mrs. Mercer stood up to go: she was sorry she couldn’t wait any longer, but it was after eight o’clock” (435). We are never told exactly why she is waiting, and it is this kind of elision that makes the story so intriguing or frustrating, depending on your point of view.
And finally, perhaps more a useful coincidence than anything else though fun to introduce in the classroom is the following information: after closing in 1987, the Jervis Street Hospital became, of all things, a shopping mall, Jervis Center, “Dublin’s premier shopping experience,” according to the Jervis Center website. In fact, when I last visited the website, an animated, seemingly outdated advertisement featuring this text was playing: “Had enough of doom and gloom? Then get that holiday cheer at the Jervis Center Holiday Fair” (“Jervis Shopping Center”). If only they’d call it a grand oriental fete; then we’d be full circle back to “Araby.”

Commercialism and Its Details

So we can understand that the young boy in the story is doing his best to preserve an idealized world that is untouched by commerce, and the exotic Araby is, as he imagines it at least, a key feature of this fantasy, providing as it does the setting for his quest narrative. We discover in the Araby catalogue image, however, exactly what the boy either does not know or does not want to know: that the whole production is, more or less, a commercial endeavor for the Sisters of Charity and their hospital. Bringing the commercial theme in the story to the foreground immediately in this way then helps to make sense of many details in the story that are more implicitly suggestive of a world that has all but gone commercial: the dead priest who used to inhabit the narrator’s home was a “very charitable priest; in his will he had left all his money to institutions” (433); the “flaring” streets, “drunken men and bargaining women” of the market to which the boy and his aunt go each Saturday evening (433); Mrs. Mercer’s “piety,” perhaps little more than forced charity and/or debt collection (435); mid-story, the boy holds a “florin tightly,” understanding it as the key to enter the mystical, and in his mind noncommercial, Araby, not as the money that it actually is (435); the streets “thronged with buyers” that he passes on his way to the train to Araby (435); the boy pays a shilling at the entrance to Araby, which is the adult fare, as opposed to paying the child’s fare at the “sixpenny entrance” (436); finally at the bazaar, itself almost closed for the day, the boy sees “two men [. . .] counting money on a salver” and he “listens to the fall of coins” (436); he is asked, perfunctorily, if he “wish[es] to buy anything” by a woman at one of the bazaar stalls (436); the boy allows the “two
pennies" remaining from his original florin to “fall against the sixpence in [his] pocket” (436); he hears, at this point, a voice declaring that the bazaar is closed—“the light was out”—and then gazes into the darkness, driven and derided by vanity (436).

We knew all along that the boy was headed to a marketplace, a commercial enterprise; sadly, he himself did not. What remains, though, is to bring to light the kind of Catholic upbringing and education that has, in all likelihood, provided the young boy with the images and ideas through which he understand his role (as adorer, as questing knight, as religious pilgrim, as suffering martyr) relative to the drama that he himself admits is a “confused adoration” (343): his first boyhood crush. It is this basic background that Dennis Courtney’s film adaptation of “Araby” makes so available, and thus why, in combination, the Araby catalogue cover image and the “Araby” film work so well together.

“Araby” on Film

The 1999 film adaptation of “Araby,” directed by Dennis J. Courtney from a screenplay by Courtney and Joseph Bierman, runs a classroom-friendly 21 minutes. (Its attendant website can be found at <www.arabyfilm.com>.) The short film is particularly useful because it provides such tangible, visual evidence of the pervasive Catholicism of the young boy’s surroundings. One reviewer applauded the film’s representation of the “controlling, constrictive aspects of society” for example (Boyce). The film ultimately helps us to get at what one Joyce critic calls the “mythic, religious and legendary patterns that Joyce seems to place so frequently at the very center of each story” (Torchiana 9).

The film follows the text closely enough that students will hear Joyce’s language, and events follow as they do in the story; however, the film makes a couple of noteworthy interpolations and editing choices that highlight key themes. As the film opens, for example, the young boys of the neighborhood are depicted playing with wooden swords and shields; this foreshadows the knightly, or chivalric, quest narrative that will develop. Bringing this motif even more to the foreground, the character of Mangan responds to his sister’s request that he come inside for the evening in this way: “I’ll only respond to me valiant name of Sir Thomas.”

A more subtle shift occurs when the following lines from the text are voiced over as the young boy thinks to himself: “Her name accompa-
ried me even in places the most hostile to romance" (433). What follows in the text implies that the place most hostile to romance is the Saturday market to which the young boy and his aunt routinely go. However, when the line is voiced over in the film, the young boy is in church at prayer; this gives us the bold suggestion that the church itself is equally hostile to romance. Further intriguing is that while praying in church in this scene, the young boy looks up "adoringly" to a statue of the Virgin Mary. The moment recalls rather consciously an earlier scene in which the young boy has looked up towards Mangan’s sister, the object of his “confused adoration” (434). This pattern brings quite clearly to life what many Joyce critics have noted as the boy’s having confused passion and piety (Tura 210).

One of the most helpful scenes that the film provides pictures the young boy and his Catholic school classmates learning about “the Christian martyrs,” as he later explains to Mrs. Mercer and as the Jesuit priest explains to the class. Specifically, the class is learning about Tarcisius, the 3rd-century suffering saint whose tale many Joyce critics have identified as providing a major allegorical underpinning for “Araby.” This legend is never actually mentioned in the story. Tarcisius is traditionally the “boy-saint,” as he was said to be twelve years old at his death, probably very close to the age of the young boy in “Araby”. To paraphrase The Catholic Encyclopedia, Tarcisius was attacked by a heathen rabble (Roman non-Christians) as he carried the Blessed Sacrament to condemned prisoners in a Roman jail; he suffered death rather than surrender the Sacred Body of Christ (Kirsch). The Tarcisius narrative thus provides a figure of suffering devotion through which the young boy ostensibly makes sense of his own confused adoration/devotion which must, he seems to imagine, involve elements of suffering, risk, and danger. And it’s the “oriental” Araby that functions as the setting for the young boy’s imagined drama.

These film cues make for excellent teaching and discussion points, in particular the explicit naming of Tarcisius, but the aspect of the film most directly tied to the financial/commercial theme I have been developing above, and for which the “Araby in Dublin” catalogue cover is so useful, is the visual depiction of the two marketplaces in the story: the Saturday night street market to which the young boy accompanies his aunt, and Araby itself, which turns out to be dark, uninviting, and ultimately little more than an extension of the Saturday night market. Donald Torchiana writes, “the generally trite, overblown, carnival atmosphere of
the charity bazaar, however worthy, is no small part of the boy's pained recognition at the story's end" (60). Of course, for the boy, Araby is hardly a carnival. If anything, what we see made explicit in the film is that Araby is not overblown (though the actual Araby as Joyce knew of it may well have been). What matters is that it is little different than the marketplace the boy already knew and disliked so much.

Even more specifically, the film depicts a brief moment during the Saturday night market when the boy, separated from his aunt, happens upon a young woman and a man who have tucked themselves into a small alley and who are whispering closely to one another. The young boy watches this flirtation for a few seconds, not exactly sure what to make of it, until the man and woman see him. The boy turns quickly away, likely equating this behavior with the rest of the squalid market, but also ashamed of his own voyeuristic interest: the voice-over provides Joyce's language, "We walked through the flaring streets, jostled by drunken men and bargaining women, amid the curses of labourers, the shrill litanies of shopboys who stood on guard by the barrels of pigs' cheeks, the nasal chanting of street singers" (433). We note that Joyce does not actually provide this "flirtation" as part of how he describes the market. The film interpolates it, however, in order to set up the very similar scene—one that Joyce does provide—at Araby.

The young boy arrives to the bazaar only to find it all but closed. Leading up to this is a voice-over provided by the boy's uncle, drunkenly reciting "The Arab's Farewell to His Steed" as the boy finally makes his way out of the house; this "recitation" reminds us of the commercial theme, telling as it does the tale of an "Arab" who deeply regrets the sale of his most precious horse: "Fret not to roam the desert now with all thy winged speed: / I may not mount on thee again — thou'rt sold, my Arab steed!" (Norton). The screenplay itself points to the filmmakers' awareness of the important role of money, particularly at this moment in the tale: "The sequence ends with the boy [. . .] taking his seat on the train. Included at this moment is a CLOSE UP of the money [that the boy has received from his Uncle]" ("Story to Film"; capitalization in original). Enthralled by his romanticized version (or vision) of what Araby will be, the boy arrives and sees "the magical name" of the bazaar displayed on a large building. As I have noted earlier, almost every detail that Joyce provides as the boy enters and explores the bazaar suggests the commercial:
there's no sixpenny entrance; the boy pays his shilling to get in; and men count coins, the sound of which captures the boy's attention (436).

What the young boy ultimately stumbles upon is "a young lady [. . .] talking and laughing with two young gentlemen" (436). Their conversation is meaningless, and the film takes great care to have this flirtation scene recall quite specifically the earlier, interpolated flirtation scene at the market. He may now even see his own adoration as little more than meaningless flirtation. Worlds are colliding for the young boy, who has remarked that in the darkening hall he has "recognized a silence like that which pervades a church after a service" (436). He of course leaves the stall where the men and woman flirt, observing the "great jars that stood like eastern guards at either side of the dark entrance to the stall" (436). We recall this useful detail from the Saturday night market: "shopboys [. . .] stood on guard by the barrels of pigs' cheeks" (433). The scenes are all too similar for the young boy for whom the spiritually removed world into which he's imagined himself as questing knight, religious pilgrim, and boy-saint has been revealed as a Saturday night market no different from the one he's been used to, and repulsed by, all along. He feels the coins in his pocket, and the irony of Uncle's earlier recitation comes home: where "The Arab's Farewell to His Steed" ends with the narrator having sold his precious horse but at the last minute changing his mind—"Who said that I had given thee up? Who said that thou wert sold? 'Tis false—'tis false! my Arab steed! I fling them back their gold,"—but the young boy is of course unable to "go back" or to somehow undo the financial deal he's entered into (Norton).

This connection of past and present experiences brings us to the end of the story and the narrator's declaration of his own vanity, a potentially confusing term, even if we've managed to unpack, with the help of our visual aids, the commercial/financial theme that has run throughout the story. So we aren't done yet.

Vanity

Here is where it becomes useful to explore the theme that carries so much weight at the story's conclusion—vanity—because the crass commercialism of Araby as a marketplace has everything to do with how the narrator (i.e., the young boy grown up) understands vanity. The problem, of course, is that if you ask most modern readers what vanity is all
about, they will likely explain that it involves egocentrism, self-absorption, and too much time primping in front of the mirror. Unhealthy concern for one's looks, in other words, is what vanity generally implies for folks today.

The vanity that the narrator sees in himself at the close of the tale—"Gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity" (436)—may involve some of this contemporary sense of self-absorption, even a kind of mirror based self-seeing, though much more is going on. Notably, the "Araby" filmmakers construct a nice moment in which the young boy literally sees himself in a mirror, or silvered tray, that hangs in a bazaar stall. And as we know, Joyce himself was fond of the "mirror" metaphor, writing in a letter to Grant Richards, "I seriously believe that you will retard the course of civilization in Ireland by preventing the Irish people from having one good look at themselves in my nicely polished looking-glass" (qtd. in Torchiana 1); the looking glass he refers to is of course his Dubliners collection.

Yet, the appearance of "vanity" at the story's end strikes many readers as a surprising turn—why is the narrator all of a sudden accusing himself of being overly concerned with his looks? This makes the impact of the "epiphany" here particularly difficult to grasp. Yet vanity at this point in "Araby," when understood in the broad, Catholic context that Joyce employed it, has everything to do with the story's ongoing financial or commercial concerns, and it actually marks the end point in a series of betrayals that the narrator—as a young boy—has suffered and that our visual aids have helped to point up.

Margaret Atwood, in her book entitled Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth, provides a very useful reading of "vanity," though she does not mention either Joyce or "Araby" specifically. And it is no coincidence, perhaps, that we find a useful reading of vanity in a book nominally devoted to issues of debt, repayment, and other commercial concerns. Writing on Thackeray's Vanity Fair, Atwood notes that the book's title is actually drawn from Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, "where it [the term "vanity"] stands not only for the 'vanity of vanities, all is vanity' of the Book of Proverbs, but especially for the realm of worldly goods, both material and spiritual, as well as for the state of mind in which absolutely everything is for sale" (103). She goes on, "Every human society sets a limit on what can be bought and sold, but in Bunyan's Vanity Fair there are no limits [...] It's a vision born of shock—the shock caused by the
old world of faith hitting the new one in which commerce is poised to become not only king but an absolute monarch” (103-104). The cultural and social turn that occurs between Bunyan’s work and Thackeray’s, according to Atwood, is that where Bunyan could, without condition, decry the dangers of vanity, Thackeray’s treatment of it is much more “ironic” (Atwood’s term) in that “Rawden Crawley and Becky Sharp [central characters in Thackeray’s novel] get away with their acts of fraud and theft” (105). In other words, there is no consequence for vanity. The young boy in Joyce’s “Araby” inhabits a world where, under the surface, the spiritual, the religious, and the commercial have collided, seemingly without consequence, and are deeply intertwined: the Jervis St. Hospital and Araby bazaar being pivotal examples of this.

Conclusion

In arriving to “vanity” at the story’s conclusion (or, seeing in his younger self the sin of vanity), the narrator sees that the spiritual world that had been above the common fray, at least in his understanding of it, and that had provided the setting for his “confused” self-image of martyr, knight, and pilgrim, was anything but a world removed from everyday concerns. He had fallen for the ruse, however, a lapse for which the narrator of “Araby”—the young boy grown up and fully absorbed into the constricting Catholicism that was so often the target of Joyce’s work—his younger self in the harshest terms possible.

One Joyce scholar, Donald Torchiana, has argued generally that “each detail in any story [in Joyce’s Dubliners collection] had about it a built-in significance that no educated native Irishman could really miss and no outsider, armed with a guide to Ireland and a bit of imagination, could fail to detect” (2). Since I get few native Irishmen or Irish women in my classes, and since my students usually come to class with a guide to Ireland, I now rely on my two “Araby” visual aids. They provide a guidebook of sorts: an especially compact way of getting students to see the theme of commercialism and its attendant theme of charity from the start. The catalogue image and Courtney’s film can thus go a long way toward helping students to appreciate the subtlety of the story and the degree to which it repays careful reading. They certainly help me get closer to really “teaching” James Joyce’s “Araby.”
1. This film was actually produced with a view to its being a teaching aid; Dennis Courtney noted to me, “It’s wonderful that you are able to use the adaptation as an aid in teaching the story. We had always hoped that the film could be used that way.” Joseph Bierman expressed similar sentiments when we corresponded: “The project was a labor of love for both of us. I am very happy to hear that you get good use of the film in your teaching.” He goes on, “I must say that as a filmmaker and teacher, I am very thankful to hear that the film is being used to help students explore the world of James Joyce. It was my love of that world that drew both Dennis and myself to the project in the first place” (Bierman). Of interest to those using the film will certainly be Bierman’s article on the subject of adapting “Araby” for the screen, “Two Characters, A Career Author and the Implied Readers: A Search for the Dominant in ‘Araby.’”

2. It is noteworthy that nursing duties and internal management of the Jervis Street Hospital were turned over to the Sisters of Charity religious order in 1854 (Gallagher 2; O’Brien 258). In his welcome address to the religious order, the chairman of the hospital’s committee of management noted the “advantages we have hoped for the Institution from your [the Sisters of Charity] connection with it. From this day it will hold a different position before the public—a position ensuring increased confidence and sympathy, and by that means more bountiful support from all true friends of Charity” (qtd. in O’Brien 18).

Works Cited

Courtney, Dennis J. Email correspondence. March 11, 2009.


Figure 1 on the next page: The official catalogue of “Araby,” grand oriental fe’tte at Ball’s Bridge, Dublin: in aid of Jervis Street Hospital, May 14th . . . 19th, 1894. Reproduced from the original held in Special Collections, University College Dublin Library.
ARABY
IN
DUBLIN

OFFICIAL CATALOGUE

GRAND ORIENTAL FÊTE

May 14th to 19th 1894.

IN AID OF

JERVIS ST. HOSPITAL